

S-E-C-R-E-T

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

26 May 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Middle Eastern Crisis

1. The first thing that calls for explanation in the present crisis is why Nasser chose at this moment to abandon his long-standing reluctance to risk military confrontation with Israel.

a. At the immediate moment Nasser was probably prompted to initiate these maneuvers by Israeli threats against Syria. He probably felt that he had to identify himself with Arab nationalist interests and that some action on his part would refurbish his image in the Arab world. These views, however, are probably insufficient to explain all the events that have occurred.

b. He probably had decided (though he stated the contrary not long ago) that his armed forces were improved to the point where they could successfully stand off an Israeli offensive, even though they might be unable to defeat Israel decisively.

GROUP 1
Excluded from automatic
downgrading and
declassification

S-E-C-R-E-T

MORI/CDF

S-E-C-R-E-T

Accordingly, he may have felt that if he could get his army properly deployed in the Sinai Peninsula and elsewhere, the chances of war would be acceptable.

c. It is possible that the Soviets encouraged him in these views. We do not believe that the whole operation is a Soviet plan, or even that the Soviets urged him to his present course of action, but their attitude must have been sufficiently permissive so that he knew he could count on political and logistic support from them in the course of the crisis. The interests of the Soviet Union itself would obviously be served by successes for Nasser at the expense of Israel and the US.

d. The US preoccupation with Vietnam and the bad blood occasioned thereby between the US and the USSR, probably had some important influence on the nature of Nasser's decision as well as its timing.

e. There may have been some element of desperation in Nasser's attitude, arising from the parlous condition of the Egyptian economy, the worsening of relations with the US, a belief that some sort of US-Israeli plot against him existed, and perhaps a fatalistic conclusion that a showdown with Israel must come

- 2 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

sooner or later, and might best be provoked before Israel acquired nuclear weapons.

f. He may also have concluded, from a tactical point of view, that he could gamble on US influence and perhaps some Israeli indecisiveness to prevent an Israeli offensive at the early and most vulnerable stages of his deployments.

2. The movement of UAR troops seems to have gone smoothly and expertly. Yet there must have been in this as in other crises a large element of accident in the actual course of events. For example, Nasser probably did not expect such a speedy departure of UN forces from Sharm el Sheikh, giving him opportunity for a quick seizure of the position and an announced closing of the Strait. He has thus far managed the crisis, from his point of view, with great skill and success.

3. Clearly Nasser has won the first round. It is possible that he may seek a military show-down with Israel, designed to settle the whole problem once and for all. This seems to us highly unlikely. We still do not believe that Nasser considers his forces (together with those of other Arab states) capable of carrying such a campaign to a successful conclusion. And in our

- 3 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

opinion they are not so capable. Moreover we believe that the Soviets would almost certainly advise Nasser against a military effort of this magnitude, perhaps with strong insistence.

4. The most likely course seems to be for Nasser to hold to his present winnings as long as he can, and in as full measure as he can. As of the moment he has vastly enhanced his own prestige in Egypt and throughout the Arab world, diminished the standing of Israel and, at least for the moment, administered a serious setback to the US. Moreover, by simply standing where he is he places the Israelis in an extremely difficult position. He keeps the crisis at high pitch, and as long as this continues the Israelis must remain mobilized. This they cannot do for long without adverse effects upon their economy.

5. The Israelis face dismaying choices. Surprised and shaken by Nasser's action, they failed to take the instant military counteraction which might have been most effective. If they attack now they will face far more formidable opposition than in the rapid campaign of 1956. We believe that they would still be able to drive the Egyptians away from the entrance to the Strait of Tiran, but it would certainly cost them heavy losses of

- 4 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

men and materiel. We are not sure that they have sufficient stockpiles of ammunition and equipment for a war lasting more than three or four weeks, and it is possible that they would not embark upon a major campaign without prior assurances from the US of adequate resupply.

6. But the alternative for the Israelis is perilous. To acquiesce in the permanent closing of the Strait of Tiran would constitute an economic and political setback from which no early recovery would be foreseeable. The Israeli would expect, correctly we believe, that the Arabs over the long run would be encouraged to undertake new and still more dangerous harassments. We are inclined to believe that unless the US and other major powers take whatever steps are necessary to reopen the Strait, the Israeli will feel compelled to go to war.

7. In this event they might choose to begin hostilities by attacking Syria and wait for the Egyptians to respond. If the Egyptians did not, Nasser would lose much of what he has gained. If they did, they would lose the advantage of their defensive positions.

- 5 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

8. The Soviets are unlikely to take vigorous steps to calm down the crisis so long as it continues to produce deleterious effects upon Israel (and the US) and advantages for Nasser. Nevertheless they may be apprehensive about the future course of events. They may not have known in advance about the closing of the Strait. We do not believe that they desire a Middle Eastern war or that they have planned with Nasser the destruction of Israel at this juncture. They will probably oppose by diplomatic and propagandistic means any efforts by the US and the Western Powers to open the Strait. But, if we assume an attempt by the Western Powers to open the Strait by military force, we do not think that the Soviets would use their own armed forces in opposition.

9. One almost certain objective of the Soviets is to see the US more firmly and publicly identified with Israel. This would have the obvious effect of making the entire Arab world -- including in an ambivalent way even the more conservative states -- convinced that the US is irrevocably committed to their common ^{further} enemy. It would/weaken the US position in the area, threaten US oil interests, and strengthen the Soviet position as friend and protector of all Arabs against their imperialist foes. This Soviet

- 6 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

aim has already been realized in considerable degree. Moreover the Soviets must be glad to see US attention diverted from Vietnam, but it does not seem likely that they think the Middle Eastern crisis will appreciably affect US military capabilities or intentions in Southeast Asia.

10. One important question is what the Soviets would do if the Israeli attacked the UAR and waged a successful campaign. Such an event would be a grave setback for Nasser and, by extension, for the USSR itself. Nevertheless we do not believe that the Soviets would intervene in the conflict with their own combat forces. They could, of course, use their bomber and missile forces against Israel, but they would be very unlikely to do so, though they might threaten it. They do not have the capability of introducing lesser kinds of forces (ground troops, or volunteers) in this area with sufficient speed to be decisive, and we do not think they would try to do so. They would be cautious about the risk of armed confrontation with US forces. And they would probably count upon the political intervention of great powers, including themselves, to stop the fighting before Nasser had suffered too much damage.

- 7 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

11. The position of other Arab countries than the UAR is, at this stage of crisis, ancillary and comparatively unimportant. Conceivably Syria might touch off larger hostilities by attacking Israel in force, but we believe that both Nasser and the USSR would be opposed to such action. If war broke out Syrian forces would engage, other Arab states would send help, but it would not matter very much. The crisis in its present acute intensity is essentially one between Israel and the UAR, the US and the UAR, and (to a more moderate degree) between the US and the USSR. The course of events will depend upon the action and reactions of these powers.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

25X1

SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

- 8 -

S-E-C-R-E-T